

"I don't like your tone, Mr. Armitage!"

"I don't like to use that tone, Captain Claiborne."

Shirley walked quickly to the table and put down the message. Then, going to the door, she paused as though by an afterthought, and repeated quite slowly the words:

"Winkelried—Vienna—not later than Friday—Chauvenet."

"Shirley!" roared Claiborne.

John Armitage bowed to the already vacant doorway; then bounded into the hall out upon the veranda and ran through the garden to the side gate, where Oscar waited.

Half an hour later Captain Claiborne, after an interview with Baron von Marhof, turned his horse toward the hills.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PRISONER AT THE BUNGALOW

So, exultant of heart, with front toward the bridges of battle,
Sat they the whole night long, and the fires that they kindled were many.
E'en as the stars in her train, with the moon as she walketh in splendor,
Blaze forth bright in the heavens on nights when the welkin is breathless,
Nights when the mountain peaks, their jutting cliffs, and the valleys,
All are disclosed to the eye, and above them the fathomless ether
Opens to star after star, and glad is the heart of the shepherd—
Such and so many the fires 'twixt the ships and the streams of the Xanthus
Kept ablaze by the Trojans in front of the darkening city.
Over the plains were burning a thousand fires, and beside them
Each sat fifty men in the firelight glare; and the horses,
Champing their fodder and barley white, and instant for action,
Stood by the chariot-side and awaited the glory of morning.

The Iliad: Translation of Prentiss Cummings.

"In Vienna, Friday!"

"There should be great deeds, my dear Jules;" and

Monsieur Durand adjusted the wick of a smoking brass lamp that hung suspended from the ceiling of a room of the inn, store and post-office at Lamar.

"Meanwhile, this being but Wednesday, we have our work to do."

"Which is not so simple after all, as one studies the situation. Mr. Armitage is here, quite within reach. We suspect him of being a person of distinction. He evinced unusual interest in a certain document that was once in your own hands—"

"Our own hands, if you would be accurate!"

"You are captious; but granted so, we must get them back. The gentleman is dwelling in a bungalow on the mountain side, for greater convenience in watching events and wooing the lady of his heart's desire. We employed a clumsy clown to put him out of the world; but he dies hard, and now we have got to get rid of him. But if he hasn't the papers on his clothes then you have this pleasant scheme for kidnapping him, getting him down to your steamer at Baltimore and cruising with him until he is ready to come to terms. The American air has done much for your imagination, my dear Jules; or possibly the altitude of the hills has over-stimulated it."

"You are not the fool you look, my dear Durand. You have actually taken a pretty fair grasp of the situation."

"But the adorable young lady, the fair Mademoiselle Claiborne,—what becomes of her in these transactions?"

"That is none of your affair," replied Chauvenet, frowning. "I am quite content with my progress. I have not finished in that matter."

"Neither, it would seem, has Mr. John Armitage! But I am quite well satisfied to leave it to you. In a few days we shall know much more than we do now. I should be happier if you were in charge in Vienna. A false step there—ugh! I hesitate to think of the wretched mess there would be."

"Trust Winkelried to do his full duty. You must not forget that the acute Stroebel now sleeps the long sleep and that many masses have already been said for the repose of his intrepid soul."

"The splendor of our undertaking is enough to draw his ghost from the grave. Ugh! By this time Zmai should have filed our cablegram at the Springs and got your mail at the hotel. I hope you have not misplaced your confidence in the operator there. Coming back, our giant must pass Armitage's house."

"Trust him to pass it! His encounters with Armitage have not been to his credit."

The two men were dressed in rough clothes, as for an outing, and in spite of the habitual trifling tone of their talk, they wore a serious air. Durand's eyes danced with excitement and he twisted his mustache nervously. Chauvenet had gone to Washington to meet Durand, to get from him news of the progress of the conspiracy in Vienna, and, not least, to berate him for crossing the Atlantic. "I do not require watching, my dear Durand," he had said.

"A man in love, dearest Jules, sometimes forgets," but they had gone into the Virginia hills amicably and were quartered with the postmaster. They waited now for Zmai, whom they had sent to the Springs with a message and to get Chauvenet's mail. Armitage, they had learned, used the Lamar telegraph office and they had decided to carry their business elsewhere.

While they waited in the bare upper room of the inn for Zmai, the big Servian tramped up the mountain side with an aching head and a heart heavy with dread. The horse he had left tied in a thicket when he plunged down through the Claiborne place had broken free and run away; so that he must now trudge back afoot to report

to his masters. He had made a mess of his errands and nearly lost his life besides. The bullet from Oscar's revolver had cut a neat furrow in his scalp, which was growing sore and stiff as it ceased bleeding. He would undoubtedly be dealt with harshly by Chauvenet and Durand, but he knew that the sooner he reported his calamities the better; so he stumbled toward Lamar, pausing at times to clasp his small head in his great hands. When he passed the wild tangle that hid Armitage's bungalow he paused and cursed the two occupants in his own dialect with a fierce vile tongue. It was near midnight when he reached the tavern and climbed the rickety stairway to the room where the two men waited.

Chauvenet opened the door at his approach, and they cried aloud as the great figure appeared before them and the lamplight fell upon his dark blood-smeared face.

"The letters!" snapped Chauvenet.

"Is the message safe?" demanded Durand.

"Lost; lost; they are lost! I lost my way and he nearly killed me,—the little soldier,—as I crossed a strange field."

When they had jerked the truth from Zmai, Chauvenet flung open the door and bawled through the house for the innkeeper.

"Horses; saddle our two horses quick—and get another if you have to steal it," he screamed. Then he turned into the room to curse Zmai, while Durand with a towel and water sought to ease the ache in the big fellow's head and cleanse his face.

"So that beggarly little servant did it, did he? He stole that paper I had given you, did he? What do you imagine I brought you to this country for if you are to let two stupid fools play with you as though you were a clown?"

The Servian, on his knees before Durand, suffered the torrent of abuse meekly. He was a scoundrel, hired to do murder; and his vilification by an angered employer did not greatly trouble him, particularly since he understood little of Chauvenet's rapid German.

In half an hour Chauvenet was again in a fury, learning at Lamar that the operator had gone down the road twenty miles to a dance and would not be back until morning.

The imperturbable Durand shivered in the night air and prodded Chauvenet with ironies.

"We have no time to lose. That message must go to-night. You may be sure Monsieur Armitage will not

send it for us. Come, we've got to go down to Storm Springs."

They rode away in the starlight, leaving the postmaster alarmed and wondering. Chauvenet and Durand were well mounted on horses that Chauvenet had sent into the hills in advance of his own coming. Zmai rode grim and silent on a clumsy plow-horse, which was the best the publican could find for him. The knife was not the only weapon he had known in Servia; he carried a potato sack across his saddle-bow. Chauvenet and Durand sent him ahead to set the pace with his inferior mount. They talked together in low tones as they followed.

"He is not so big a fool, this Armitage," remarked Durand. "He is quite deep, in fact. I wish it were he we are trying to establish on a throne, and not that pitiful scapegrace in Vienna."

"I gave him his chance down there in the valley and he laughed at me. It is quite possible that he is not a fool; and quite certain that he is not a coward."

"Then he would not be a safe king. Our young friend in Vienna is a good deal of a fool and altogether a coward. We shall have to provide him with a spine at his coronation."

"If we fail—" began Chauvenet.

"You suggest a fruitful but unpleasant topic. If we fail we shall be fortunate if we reach the hospitable shores of the Argentine for future residence. Paris and Vienna would not know us again. If Winkelried succeeds in Vienna and we lose here, where do we arrive?"

"We arrive quite where Mr. Armitage chooses to land us. He is a gentleman of resources; he has money; he laughs cheerfully at misadventures; he has had you watched by the shrewdest eyes in Europe,—and you are considered a hard man to keep track of, my dear Durand. And not least important,—he has to-night snatched away that little cablegram that was the signal to Winkelried to go ahead. He is a very annoying and vexatious person, this Armitage. Even Zmai, whose knife made him a terror in Servia, seems unable to cope with him."

"And the fair daughter of the valley—"

"Pish! We are not discussing the young lady."

"I can understand how unpleasant the subject must be to you, my dear Jules. What do you imagine *she* knows of Monsieur Armitage? If he is the man we think he is and a possible heir to a great throne it would be impossible for her to marry him."

"His tastes are democratic. In Montana he is quite popular."

Durand flung away his cigarette and laughed suddenly.

"Has it occurred to you that this whole affair is decidedly amusing? Here we are, in one of the free American states, about to turn a card that will dethrone a king, if we are lucky. And here is a man we are trying to get out of the way—a man we might make king if he were not a fool! In America! It touches my sense of humor, my dear Jules!"

An exclamation from Zmai arrested them. The Servian jerked up his horse and they were instantly at his side. They had reached a point near the hunting preserve in the main highway. It was about half-past one o'clock, an hour at which Virginia mountain roads are usually free of travelers, and they had been sending their horses along as briskly as the uneven roads and the pace of Zmai's laggard beast permitted.

The beat of a horse's hoofs could be heard quite distinctly in the road ahead of them. The road tended downward, and the strain of the ascent was marked in the approaching animal's walk; in a moment the three men heard the horse's quick snort of satisfaction as it

reached leveler ground; then scenting the other animals, it threw up its head and neighed shrilly.

In the dusk of starlight Durand saw Zmai dismount and felt the Servian's big rough hand touch his in passing the bridle of his horse.

"Wait!" said the Servian.

The horse of the unknown paused, neighed again, and refused to go farther. A man's deep voice encouraged him in low tones. The horses of Chauvenet's party danced about restlessly, responsive to the nervousness of the strange beast before them.

"Who goes there?"

The stranger's horse was quiet for an instant and the rider had forced him so near that the beast's up-reined head and the erect shoulders of the horseman were quite clearly defined.

"Who goes there?" shouted the rider; while Chauvenet and Durand bent their eyes toward him, their hands tight on their bridles, and listened, waiting for Zmai. They heard a sudden rush of steps, the impact of his giant body as he flung himself upon the shrinking horse; and then a cry of alarm and rage. Chauvenet slipped down and ran forward with the quick, soft glide of a cat and caught the bridle of the stranger's horse. The

horseman struggled in Zmai's great arms, and his beast plunged wildly. No words passed. The rider had kicked his feet out of the stirrups and gripped the horse hard with his legs. His arms were flung up to protect his head, over which Zmai tried to force the sack.

"The knife?" bawled the Servian.

"No!" answered Chauvenet.

"The devil!" yelled the rider; and dug his spurs into the rearing beast's flanks.

Chauvenet held on valiantly with both hands to the horse's head. Once the frightened beast swung him clear of the ground. A few yards distant Durand sat on his own horse and held the bridles of the others. He soothed the restless animals in low tones, the light of his cigarette shaking oddly in the dark with the movement of his lips.

The horse ceased to plunge; Zmai held its rider erect with his left arm while the right drew the sack down over the head and shoulders of the prisoner.

"Tie him," said Chauvenet; and Zmai buckled a strap about the man's arms and bound them tight.

The dust in the bag caused the man inside to cough, but save for the one exclamation he had not spoken. Chauvenet and Durand conferred in low tones while

Zmai drew out a tether strap and snapped it to the curb-bit of the captive's horse.

"The fellow takes it pretty coolly," remarked Durand, lighting a fresh cigarette. "What are you going to do with him?"

"We will take him to his own place—it is near—and coax the papers out of him; then we'll find a precipice and toss him over. It is a simple matter."

Zmai handed Chauvenet the revolver he had taken from the silent man on the horse.

"I am ready," he reported.

"Go ahead; we follow;" and they started toward the bungalow, Zmai riding beside the captive and holding fast to the led-horse. Where the road was smooth they sent the horses forward at a smart trot; but the captive accepted the gait; he found the stirrups again and sat his saddle straight. He coughed now and then, but the hemp sack was sufficiently porous to give him a little air. As they rode off his silent submission caused Durand to ask:

"Are you sure of the man, my dear Jules?"

"Undoubtedly. I didn't get a square look at him, but he's a gentleman by the quality of his clothes. He is the same build; it is not a plow-horse, but a thoroughbred

he's riding. The gentlemen of the valley are in their beds long ago."

"Would that we were in ours! The spring nights are cold in these hills!"

"The work is nearly done. The little soldier is yet to reckon with; but we are three; and Zmai did quite well with the potato sack."

Chauvenet rode ahead and addressed a few words to Zmai.

"The little man must be found before we finish. There must be no mistake about it."

They exercised greater caution as they drew nearer the wood that concealed the bungalow, and Chauvenet dismounted, opened the gate and set a stone against it to insure a ready egress; then they walked their horses up the driveway.

Admonished by Chauvenet, Durand threw away his cigarette with a sigh.

"You are convinced this is the wise course, dearest Jules?"

"Be quiet and keep your eyes open. There's the house."

He halted the party, dismounted and crept forward to the bungalow. He circled the veranda, found the

blinds open, and peered into the long lounging-room, where a few embers smoldered in the broad fireplace, and an oil lamp shed a faint light. One man they held captive; the other was not in sight; Chauvenet's courage rose at the prospect of easy victory. He tried the door, found it unfastened, and with his revolver ready in his hand, threw it open. Then he walked slowly toward the table, turned the wick of the lamp high, and surveyed the room carefully. The doors of the rooms that opened from the apartment stood ajar; he followed the wall cautiously, kicked them open, peered into the room where Armitage's things were scattered about, and found his iron bed empty. Then he walked quickly to the veranda and summoned the others.

"Bring him in!" he said, without taking his eyes from the room.

A moment later Zmai had lifted the silent rider to the veranda, and flung him across the threshold. Durand, now aroused, fastened the horses to the veranda rail.

Chauvenet caught up some candles from the mantel and lighted them.

"Open the trunks in those rooms and be quick; I will join you in a moment;" and as Durand turned into Ar-

mitage's room, Chauvenet peered again into the other chambers, called once or twice in a low tone; then turned to Zmai and the prisoner.

"Take off the bag," he commanded.

Chauvenet studied the lines of the erect, silent figure as Zmai loosened the strap, drew off the bag, and stepped back toward the table on which he had laid his revolver for easier access.

"Mr. John Armitage—"

Chauvenet, his revolver half raised, had begun an ironical speech, but the words died on his lips. The man who stood blinking from the sudden burst of light was not John Armitage, but Captain Claiborne.

The perspiration on Claiborne's face had made a paste of the dirt from the potato sack, which gave him a weird appearance. He grinned broadly, adding a fantastic horror to his visage which caused Zmai to leap back toward the door. Then Chauvenet cried aloud, a cry of anger, which brought Durand into the hall at a jump. Claiborne shrugged his shoulders, shook the blood into his numbed arms; then turned his besmeared face toward Durand and laughed. He laughed long and loud as the stupefaction deepened on the faces of the two men.

The objects which Durand held caused Claiborne to

stare, and then he laughed again. Durand had caught up from a hook in Armitage's room a black cloak, so long that it trailed at length from his arms, its red lining glowing brightly where it lay against the outer black. From the folds of the cloak a sword, plucked from a trunk, dropped upon the floor with a gleam of its bright scabbard. In his right hand he held a silver box of orders, and as his arm fell at the sight of Claiborne, the gay ribbons and gleaming pendants flashed to the floor.

"It is not Armitage; we have made a mistake!" muttered Chauvenet tamely, his eyes falling from Claiborne's face to the cloak, the sword, the tangled heap of ribbons on the floor.

Durand stepped forward with an oath.

"Who is the man?" he demanded.

"It is my friend Captain Claiborne. We owe the gentleman an apology—" Chauvenet began.

"You put it mildly," cried Claiborne in English, his back to the fireplace, his arms folded, and the smile gone from his face. "I don't know your companions, Monsieur Chauvenet, but you seem inclined to the gentle arts of kidnapping and murder. Really, Monsieur—"

"It is a mistake! It is unpardonable! I can only offer you reparation—anything you ask," stammered Chauvenet.

"You are looking for John Armitage, are you?" demanded Claiborne hotly, without heeding Chauvenet's words. "Mr. Armitage is not here; he was in Storm Springs to-night, at my house. He is a brave gentleman, and I warn you that you will injure him at your peril. You may kill me here or strangle me or stick a knife into me, if you will be better satisfied that way; or you may kill him and hide his body in these hills; but, by God, there will be no escape for you! The highest powers of my government know that I am here; Baron von Marhof knows that I am here. I have an engagement to breakfast with Baron von Marhof at his house at eight o'clock in the morning, and if I am not there every agency of the government will be put to work to find you, Mr. Jules Chauvenet, and these other scoundrels who travel with you."

"You are violent, my dear sir—" began Durand, whose wits were coming back to him much quicker than Chauvenet's.

"I am not as violent as I shall be if I get a troop of cavalry from Fort Myer down here and hunt you like

rabbits through the hills. And I advise you to cable Winkelried at Vienna that the game is all off!"

Chauvenet suddenly jumped toward the table, the revolver still swinging at arm's length.

"You know too much!"

"I don't know any more than Armitage, and Baron von Marhof and my father, and the Honorable Secretary of State, to say nothing of the equally Honorable Secretary of War."

Claiborne stretched out his arms and rested them along the shelf of the mantel, and smiled with a smile which the dirt on his face weirdly accented. His hat was gone, his short hair rumpled; he dug the bricks of the hearth with the toe of his riding-boot as an emphasis of his contentment with the situation.

"You don't understand the gravity of our labors. The peace of a great Empire is at stake in this business. We are engaged on a patriotic mission of great importance."

It was Durand who spoke. Outside, Zmai held the horses in readiness.

"You are a fine pair of patriots, I swear," said Claiborne. "What in the devil do you want with John Armitage?"

"He is a menace to a great throne—an impostor—a—"

Chauvenet's eyes swept with a swift glance the cloak, the sword, the scattered orders. Claiborne followed the man's gaze, but he looked quickly toward Durand and Chauvenet, not wishing them to see that the sight of these things puzzled him.

"Pretty trinkets! But such games as yours, these pretty baubles—are not for these free hills."

"Where is John Armitage?"

Chauvenet half raised his right arm as he spoke and the steel of his revolver flashed.

Claiborne did not move; he smiled upon them, recrossed his legs, and settled his back more comfortably against the mantel-shelf.

"I really forget where he said he would be at this hour. He and his man may have gone to Washington, or they may have started for Vienna, or they may be in conference with Baron von Marhof at my father's, or they may be waiting for you at the gate. The Lord only knows!"

"Come; we waste time," said Durand in French. "It is a trap. We must not be caught here!"

"Yes; you'd better go," said Claiborne, yawning and

settling himself in a new pose with his back still to the fireplace. "I don't believe Armitage will care if I use his bungalow occasionally during my sojourn in the hills; and if you will be so kind as to leave my horse well tied out there somewhere I believe I'll go to bed. I'm sorry, Mr. Chauvenet, that I can't just remember who introduced you to me and my family. I owe that person a debt of gratitude for bringing so pleasant a scoundrel to my notice."

He stepped to the table, his hands in his pockets, and bowed to them.

"Good night, and clear out," and he waved his arm in dismissal.

"Come!" said Durand peremptorily, and as Chauvenet hesitated, Durand seized him by the arm and pulled him toward the door.

As they mounted and turned to go they saw Claiborne standing at the table, lighting a cigarette from one of the candles. He walked to the veranda and listened until he was satisfied that they had gone; then went in and closed the door. He picked up the cloak and sword and restored the insignia to the silver box. The sword he examined with professional interest, running his hand

over the embossed scabbard, then drawing the bright blade and trying its balance and weight.

As he held it thus, heavy steps sounded at the rear of the house, a door was flung open and Armitage sprang into the room with Oscar close at his heels.